

LIFE AND WORK AT EL CRUCERO:

Interviews with Nicaraguan Coffee Workers

JULIA LESAGE

(The following interviews with Nicaraguan coffee workers resulted from a project undertaken by women video makers from the Sandinista industrial labor union (CST) and salaried farmworkers' union (ATC). In consultation with women sociologists in the Agrarian Reform Ministry who were studying women's roles in agricultural production, they traveled to the El Crucero coffee growing area (about an hour's drive from Managua) to film farm women. Accompanying the crews were Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans, U.S. video activists who were working with the ATC and CST's People's Video Workshop in Managua in Sept. of 1984. Roberto Alvarez, of the People's Video Workshop contributed a subsequent interview based on his experience as a farmworker and union organizer in the region.)

The interviews are important because they demonstrate what a trade union means in revolutionary Nicaragua and show what a difference the small changes (in terms of standard of living) have made in workers' lives and how often the labor struggles mean more to people in rural areas than issues about the national government. Alvarez is an organic intellectual, in the Gramscian sense, and has developed a genuinely materialist analysis of the relation between work and social life as a result of his participation in the trade union movement. Furthermore, he is not squeamish about discussing problems usually dealt with only by feminists in the U.S., eg. incest. Both Alvarez and the farm women, Reyna Flores and Elena Reyes, have a down-to-earth, unsentimental, and unmoralistic view of farm life and farm labor from which they draw a sophisticated, hopeful, and sometimes skeptical projection of the scope of farmworkers' conditions in Nicaragua. The women tell a story that gives a very different texture to our understanding of Nicaragua than we hear from either government officials on solidarity tours, or U.S. solidarity group reports. For example, Reyna discusses her own learning disability in both personal and social terms, and both Reyna and Elena have skeptically confronted Daniel Ortega about the polluted water they have to drink. Together, the interviews reminded me of the texture of Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, in which the poor have the best political understanding and the least corrupt consciousness. The power of the FSLN is that it understands this and sees that it has to win the hearts and minds of these sectors of the population by paying attention to their needs. At its best, the government "delivers" to the poorest because it really understands what the popular slogan, from Sandino, means: "Only the workers and peasants will go on till the end."

Julia Lesage

FARMWORK: AN ORGANIZER'S ANALYSIS

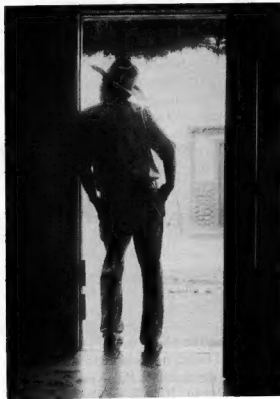
Roberto Alvarez worked as a fulltime organizer with the Nicaraguan Association of Salaried Farm Laborers (ATC) after the 1979 revolution, and now is a videomaker with the People's Video Workshop of the ATC and the CST (the Central Sandinista de Trabajadores — the Sandinista Industrial Workers Union). Alvarez speaks about the living and work conditions in El Crucero, where he had worked as an organizer and where he and his family still live. El Crucero is a hilly area about 30 miles from Managua, the principal crop of which is coffee. Farmworkers' life in Nicaragua has a social pattern that varies according to crop — coffee, corn, tobacco, or cotton. (For example, coffee workers eat in a central dining hall, or they can withdraw a food ration to share with their children.) Alvarez' description of farmworkers' life in El Crucero would apply to that of salaried farmworkers in coffee-growing areas of Nicaragua in general.

Work Process

We do coffee planting much more scientifically now. First we start plants in boxes, then move seedlings to a smaller area of cultivation, and from there to the fields. We're replacing the old plants, which have a life of about 50 years, but the new ones will not bear fruit until nine years from now. Historically, planting, transplanting, and then getting the seedlings out to the fields was the work of women and children, but now women do it since we do not have children working as much in the fields anymore. We've made a major technical advance — now we plant each seedling in a plastic bag. That makes the women's work a lot easier and prevents the seedlings from breaking as they are transplanted. It means we can transport the plants to the fields safer and easier — and with great savings. The coffee seedling is planted on the shady side of the hill. Each plant has to be taken care of — hoed around and watered — and this is traditionally men's work. [Trans. note: Agricultural advisors are helping the workers cultivate the bottom land as well for cash crops like potatoes, which come in four times a year.]

Workers also gain from the use of chemicals. To clear a mountainside, we often use flame throwers to clear a hill instead of machetes. Although men traditionally did the heavy work with machetes, now both men and women operate the flame throwers. Usually women put down fertilizer on the cleared hill. Later, men prune the coffee trees, although some women are starting to do that as well. Grass and weeds that grow up on the mountain are also eliminated chemically.

During the harvest, men, women, children and old people participate. Harvesting coffee does not require difficult or specialized labor. Actually, coffee doesn't mature all at once, but in three different stages. In El Crucero some of it matures in November, some in December, and some in January. To get a higher quality coffee crop, we only pick the ripe beans each time we harvest. That way we get a much better price on the international market. In January there's not much coffee left to pick. In a few instances, the workers harvest all the grains at once but with a marked loss in quality since



Steve Cagan, from a photographic portrait of the city of Esteli, Nicaragua.



Pablo Mayorga, La Palmera

there are many green beans. We need coffee as a high quality export crop to help balance our import/export ration.

The Farmworkers' Union

The whole union movement has grown up since the revolution. Before that some urban workers understood their link to agricultural workers and tried to form farmworker unions, but that whole movement was wiped out. After the revolution, wage differences according to sex were abolished by law, and that immediately had a great effect here because women always were a large part of the workforce but earned significantly less than men in this area. However, after the revolution, at first only men participated in the farmworkers' union, with women beginning to join in 1981 or 1982. Our first demands were around salary, the second to establish standardized work norms.

In the old days an overseer pushed the fieldworkers to increase production. Everyone

hated that person. Now we just have a work director who guides those not really familiar with the work. The kinds of tasks he supervises are washing, drying and loading the beans, carrying sacks, transplanting, etc. Most important, all the farm union representatives in the country got together to name the jobs that comprise the labor for a day's wage, now 42 cordovas.

When I was a union organizer in El Crucero, our biggest struggle was to improve the quality of food in the communal dining hall, especially to guarantee a nutritionally balanced diet. Historically, farmworkers have always eaten just rice and beans. Since the triumph we have not been able to improve that diet much. Workers now do not get as upset about salary as about food and living conditions. However, farmworkers *do* have much better living conditions. You may not see that improvement on the surface, but in particular the government is setting up much more efficient channels of food distribution, for which the union will supervise the mechanisms. The other serious complaints

workers had were about sanitation and work conditions. For example when people get up at 5 a.m. and start washing the coffee beans in big tanks, the water may be absolutely freezing. They want better conditions to do that. They are demanding clean water to drink, too, and exterminators to keep insects out of the living quarters.

As far as food goes, the basic provisions will be sold at low subsidized prices right at the major farm centers. [*Trans. note:* These basics are rice, beans, corn, millet, cooking oil, toilet paper, and soap.] Furthermore, in the dining hall where the workers get three meals a day, they now get protein such as meat, eggs, or cheese for the main meal at least every other day and often every day.

Our union is also fighting for part time, seasonal workers' pregnancy benefits. When women farmworkers are pregnant, they do keep on working. Fulltime women farmworkers have the same rights as urban industrial workers, with six weeks leave before and six weeks after they give birth. Many local union

branches are fighting to extend that right by contract to women who work seasonally, since this is not written into law. During the harvest when most people work, the only things that part time workers have covered are work-related injuries such as falling or cutting themselves while actually working in the fields. Then the employer must cover medical costs.

Social Relations

Social relations in rural areas have changed drastically as a result of the revolution. I think people have a larger number of friends now, and the friendships have grown out of people's trying to accomplish certain social tasks together. In particular, men have learned to form healthier mutual relationships—no longer primarily related to going to bars or prostitutes together. Men mostly used to get together as drinking buddies and the bars were centers for vice. Men and women make friends now where they work, and when four or five workers from different workplaces get together, it's to discuss



ATC union members at a local meeting on their farm. El Crucero, Nicaragua, September 1984. Photo: Chuck Kleinhans.

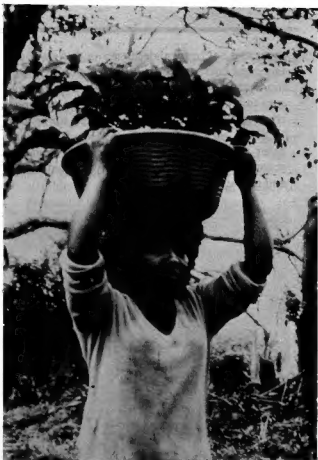
some kind of problem. At that point they gain a new social understanding of the problems which other people have, and they also learn a new form of social interchange. "We had this kind of problem over here, and this is what we did about it," they say. Not only do they learn about different solutions to various problems from each other, but for men, this kind of interaction has completely changed their mindset about fraternal relations and friendship.

Women have traditionally built up this kind of relationship during the harvest alongside other women. Women who come from neighboring farms look forward to meeting each other at harvest time. Sometimes they will form a work group to go off and harvest together in a different area. We've used this informal social formation to improve the harvest by having different groups compete against each other.

In terms of love relations, farm courtships do not last as long as in the city, where people might court a year or two. You might hear a fellow serenading his lady in the middle of the night, but it's not like Romeo and Juliet. In the city, people in their 20s often have not had children yet, but here adolescents of 15 or 16 usually do. Frequently the couple live on the same farm. Probably the girl's or boy's mother will set aside a room in her house for them to live together. The extended family unit then functions as a unified economic unit, and all usually work together in the same work group during harvest. If, however, the couple did not have good relations with their parents, they would probably both go to work on another farm.

Rural courtship relations are very elegant but brief. And usually the pair will stick together over a very long period of time, although a man often has children by several women. It is rare that people get married by a judge or a priest. Lovers get together because they love each other but are not tied together formally even though most of the people are Catholic. Nicaragua has many single mothers.

In economic terms, when a man and a woman are together, they both help support the children. On the other hand, a single mother gets very little support and she has to work to feed her children by herself. Since a woman's husband might have children by another

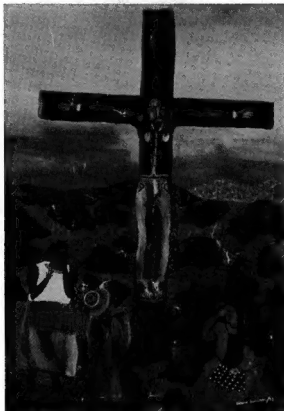


Carrying coffee seedlings to the fields for transplanting is traditionally a woman's job. Photo: Chuck Kleinhans.

woman, a woman knows she's really got to work for *her* kids. At harvest time, you'll see many children out cutting coffee because the whole family has to earn as much as they can then so they can survive for the rest of the year. When a woman runs a household, aside from harvest time, only she and not the children will be able to find work. When there are a bunch of children, the adolescents go out to work as adults and give money to the family; a child that's usually about 10 years old will be left to take care of the younger ones.

Economically, the family's income could be supplemented by raising animals for food—now it's usually a hog and some chickens. I think that the rural workers have not organized this aspect of their life very well and have to be faulted here for a lack of planning and initiative. As coffee production has become more sophisticated technologically, people say they don't have the time to raise animals collectively. If they did, the animals would be in pens or

cages and not just wandering around. As we get increased coffee production, we are cultivating more small plots which the workers move from area to area to tend. Often people raise one hog close to their house and keep it tied up by its hind leg and feed it off table scraps. But other times hogs are left out on their own to roam and get in the small, newly planted plots and root up the seedlings.



Gloria Guevara, Christ, 1982, from Compañeras, Betty La Duke

The sleeping quarters provided for farmworkers represent a longstanding problem which we've only partially been able to solve. They've been remodeled somewhat but are certainly not what we'd like. Still, they are not as terrible as before the revolution. Greedy landowners originally built them so as to cram as many people as possible into the smallest amount of space. Imagine an area of 450 square meters—30 meters by 15 meters. 400 people would sleep there. Sleeping boxes which are one and a half meters wide, two meters long, and

one and a half high, would be stacked in tiers three or four high.

A father, mother and children slept in one box, so you would get five or six people sleeping in such a tiny space. This lent itself to a terrible degree of promiscuity and child sexual abuse. And venereal and infectious diseases spread fast. If a woman had a daughter by a man other than the one she was currently living with, then that daughter would be subject to incestuous relations. Even though we have not been able to improve the living conditions completely, we have enlarged the "boxes" and guaranteed each family two boxes—so that the adult couple sleeps in one place and the children in another. This has cut down on promiscuity.

Farmworkers really attacked these living conditions at the beginning of the revolution. It is clear that economic resources will not let us build individual houses for everyone, even though in a few areas we have been able to give building materials to families who collectively build their own houses under the supervision of a person who knows something about construction. A big union demand early on was to get landlords to fumigate the sleeping quarters regularly, and the farmworkers will often get together collectively on Sundays to do this. Furthermore, we clearly need other social services related to family life, especially day care centers. There's a huge demand for these, but each day care center costs around two million cordovas a year to run and we cannot respond to that demand.

In terms of sharing housework, machismo really reveals itself here. Even in the union, where the organizers fought in the revolution, the organizers may understand what it means to have women participate in the revolution and allow their wives to work in the unions, but those men will not help much with household tasks. No way. This behavior is obvious, and it certainly won't disappear soon. We see women organized as workers, but sexism is so deeply rooted that we still haven't moved beyond it yet.

Health, Education, and Transportation

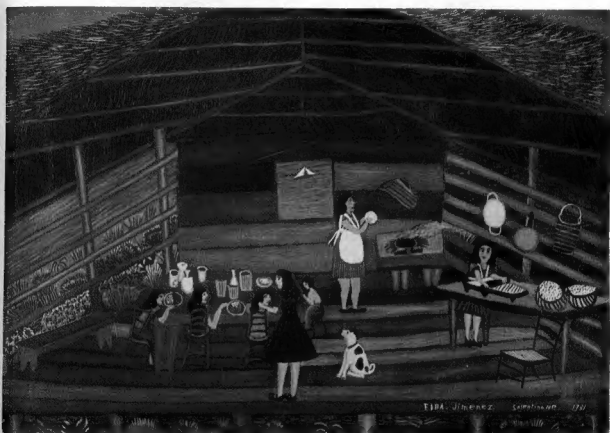
The area of El Crucero has about 30,000 people. Before the revolution, neither adults nor

children had any health care. Several missionary nuns performed social services in the area and had a little money from their order to give out some medication, but they did not have medical training. We had neither a laboratory nor a health care center for training people. Those who needed medical treatment had to go to Managua, an hour's drive away. Few ever did. In the barracks where the people lived on the farms, thousands of cockroaches, lice, and ticks lived, and flies swarmed on garbage lying around. We had a high infant mortality rate, mostly from diarrhea. And during the harvest, communicable diseases like polio spread rapidly.

After the revolution the government inaugurated a massive health care program both through health workers and through the unions. We cleaned up the environment, and then we had days set aside for inoculating the whole population. Everybody worked at that—all the people, the entire medical profession, and health care specialists from abroad who could teach people who didn't know

anything about health care to give vaccinations and work at preventive medicine. Now in El Crucero we have a health clinic that serves about 6,000 people; all the mothers come to this center to have their children taken care of. A union demand which we achieved here was that if a mother has a sick child, she will not lose a day's pay to take her child to the hospital. We also have a center in El Crucero that attends to pregnant women and healthy mothers and babies, as well as another center for treating infantile diarrhea.

One persistent problem in this area is getting pure water. El Crucero is high up and hilly. The water table lies about 600 meters below the surface, so it's hardly economical to drill a well. The farms have big central tanks where water flows in from an open patio or some other open area where they dry the coffee. People also collect the water that falls off their roofs every winter in big barrels, but they also have to haul water from the main house. All this water ordinarily contains a huge number of spiders and mosquitos. In the past, it was never



Elba Jimenez, *La Cocina de Mi Casa*



Regional officers of the salaries Farmworkers' Union meet with the El Crucero coffee workers on the Callao State Farm to discuss food distribution. Photo: Chuck Kleinhans.

chlorinated, not even with little chlorine pills. Obviously the people will get sick from such water. They still have to drink from the same sources, but the water is at least chlorinated now.

Education comes from state-run schools. We don't have any Catholic schools in the area. In fact, there are not many school houses—two big schools in the whole zone and maybe four little school houses in some suburban areas. What we do have are Cuban school teachers running schools in the big house that is at the center of many farms. These big buildings are used for a medical dispensary tended by a health care worker, a union meeting hall, a school, and a recreation area if there is a television set. In the El Crucero region, in about 12 hacienda houses on big farms, Cuban teachers live and teach three shifts a day. The little kids come to school in the morning, the big kids in the afternoon, and there's adult education in the evening.

Transportation poses a big problem—both on a personal level and on a work level. In fact, the roads stay clear both winter and summer.

It's not like in the north where when the rains come, you cannot get through because of the mud. In El Crucero, all during the year the workers can walk back into the hills where the crops are. But they can get regular transportation to and from town only during harvest time, when migrant workers come in to work in the fields. Otherwise, the farmworkers have to pay for transportation and can get bus service only on the weekends. On the weekdays, people either have to hitchhike or walk to town, and the distances are really long.

There used to be a lot of mules around to get the coffee crops out to the main highways. Now that trucks go in, we've had less development of mules. In fact, any discussion of distance and transportation is deceptive. For instance, many coffee processing machines have broken down and we have not been able to get spare parts, so we often have to transport a crop to another hacienda for processing. That's a lot to transport. Clearly, we couldn't do that if we were still dependent on mules. Mostly we use mules to go into those areas that a truck cannot enter.

National Defense

In terms of defense, El Crucero did not see a lot of fighting in the insurrection. There was more consciousness around fighting for workers' rights than about national defense. Even now only about 20 per cent of the men have signed up for the reserves. What we have seen is a big response to internal sabotage in the production units. Things like throwing stones into the coffee processing machines first occurred in 1982 or 1983 when two or three machines were broken that way. The workers do intense revolutionary vigilance at the workplace. They consider these *their* machines and take great pride in watching over them. Furthermore, workers guarding the production machines are issued rifles. Combatting sabotage has caused an important psychological change, too. This

region has not been as important militarily as economically. Ordinarily the people doing vigilance have sticks and machetes but not rifles. It is a pretty large area. The counter-revolutionaries may want to burn the crops here. In fact, some infiltrators actually burned down a work center. Some things are especially possible during harvest time when many strangers come in to pick coffee.

When the war against the contras became more acute in the North, our men were called up, and for many that was their first experience bearing arms. When they went to the mountains to fight, something really interesting happened in El Crucero. The farmworkers back home initiated the move to fill in and do the soldiers' work. It was a community response. Now El Crucero has had a lot of martyrs—men who have fallen in combat. Two months ago five fellows from here were all killed in an ambush up in North Zelaya. Furthermore, the soldiers who've returned to El Crucero, which has always lived in peace, have brought a new way of thinking and a new kind of consciousness about defense. The returning combatants are organizing defense here and providing more awareness of military principles.

The major defense issue the workers want settled here is to be issued rifles. We've taken it up as a union demand. Some rifles have been issued, but not massively. Official military analysis considers first those areas of the country which face direct danger from roving bands of contras. And paymasters or industrial centers are also protected with rifles. But farmworkers who live in areas where rifles have not been issued often do not want to get involved in the militias for that reason. They may have only an old shotgun. In some of those areas, militia enrollment may be as low as 15 per cent.

What is most outstanding about these farmworkers is their strong class consciousness. Often on a national holiday, the workers on a farm will propose to work that day and give the money to the community. Sometimes they spend the day cleaning up around all the buildings. Sometimes they will do extra work in their daily farm labor, such as weeding around another hundred trees. They may give this money to the defense fund or to a social welfare fund.



Family standing in potato field, newly cultivated as a food and cash crop. Photo: Chuck Kleinhans.

FARM LIFE: A FARMWORKER'S PERSPECTIVE

Reyna Flores

Reyna Flores lives in a small community of houses constructed by farmworkers at the state farm in El Calao in the district of El Crucero. Her living quarters are about a mile and a half up the road from the main house at the El Calao farm. The farm itself lies about five miles from the highway and about eight miles from the nearest big town, El Crucero. Amina Luna and Miriam Carrero are video makers with the People's Video Workshop of the ATC and CST and conducted the interview.

Home Life

Life here is hard. I've worked as a farm laborer ever since age 22, when my mother died and I had to go out on my own to support my child. Before that, I worked with my mother as a laundress and we used to go down to the river every day to wash from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Now I'm a little better off because my man and I work together and share resources. If I just sat around at home depending on a man's salary, I could never make it. We'd have enough to buy food but nothing else. Now, what he makes buys food, and what I make buys the children clothes. We do not have riches and cannot keep the children well dressed, but at least they don't run around naked. We do as well as we can for them with God's help.

Every day is the same. I get up around 1 or 2 a.m. and go to bed around 7 or 8 p.m. In the early morning I fix food to leave for the children, get their clothes ready and leave everything for them to go to school. I have six boys and a baby girl. The boys have to be on their own from the time they get up until I get back. My oldest is 15 and works loading and unloading seedlings from trucks. The next oldest boy is 11 and takes care of the other children. He dresses them all and takes them to school. They get out from school at noon and then come home, often carrying up a few small cans of water from the well at the hacienda

building. They eat the meal I left for them and then go out to look for firewood. Really, that's just an excuse to wander around, because they usually take over three hours to do it.

The children do some housework—wash dishes or sweep—but you can't count on them. When I get home I check to see what housework has been done, because I know children don't have the same ability for that as adults.



Reyna Flores. Photo: Chuck Kleinhaus.

And I don't have a girl to help me out with this. My girl is only 5 and not yet ready to be recruited into household service. My husband—that's him over there—helps with a few chores like fixing and serving food for the children. He also goes out looking for extra food like wild bananas. They're scarce around here, so sometimes when he cannot find bananas, he goes out and buys bread. Or if he can get some corn, then I'll get up early and make tortillas to leave for the family. My oldest boy who works is gone from 6 in the morning till 6 in the evening, and he gives me money to help me out. When he gets in at 1 or 2 in the afternoon, he'll get some firewood or haul water. He usually helps out a lot. But recently he hasn't been getting home until 8 p.m. and can't be asked to help around the house. We go to bed at 7 or 8 p.m. The hardest thing I have to

do is haul buckets of water on my head a mile and a half from the hacienda well to here.

Farm Work

Before the revolution men didn't earn very much, maybe 8 cordovas a day, and women even less. Now men and women earn the same. People also used to suffer abuse at work. The hacienda owner would assign someone to, let's say, machete work. And then out in the fields a *puntero* or point-keeping overseer would keep track of how much that worker produced. The *punteros* were like hangmen. Workers who didn't meet a quota wouldn't earn anything at all that day. The *puntero* was just an ordinary person who maybe earned a cordova a day more than the others. But for that extra peso he'd kill himself and everyone else too. He'd menace us with a whip and force us to work hours overtime. And he always received his eight pesos for the day, but not those working in the fields who fell behind; they lost a whole day's salary. All that's changed. We have neither men nor women as *punteros*. No one does that job. We're all equals at work. We all earn the same. That's the major change the revolution has brought. Now we feel very calm and at ease while working. We don't have somebody running behind us saying, "If you don't work harder, you won't earn anything at all." Before, the whole work structure was bad. Both men and women had to work much harder. We even had women *punteros* who forced the women to work.

Now if someone is very good at machete work and another one is not, the less skilled worker who falls behind is not penalized. If we're out doing machete work and some people can't go as fast, we all still earn the same. It's the same with hauling bags of seedlings. We do have someone keeping track of how many trips back and forth each person makes. One worker might make 25 trips, another 35, or another 30; and another person might even make 50 trips back and forth. But we're not going to accuse one of doing more and another of doing less. We all feel fraternal towards each other here. I wouldn't say, "She didn't work as much as me, and she's still earning what I do." But that's the way it used to be.



Elena Reyes. Photo: Chuck Kleinhans.

I always had to work just as hard when I was pregnant. Before, you didn't get any special consideration when you were pregnant. Now one of the women here is working while pregnant, and we try to let her work where the terrain is not so rugged so that she won't fall or hurt the baby. Before, the overseers had no concern at all for issues like that.

Sometimes I carry 800 seedlings a day from the trucks out to the hillsides to be planted. That's when the field is near. But yesterday we couldn't do as much because we had to carry the seedlings a long way in, so most women carried 200 or 300 seedlings; I carried 460. After that, we came here to take care of the potato field right down below us, and that was a long hike from the field where we'd been working. When the fields are close, we can get a lot more work done in a day. That's why we haven't been doing a lot of volunteer work for defense lately—which means that the group would



Steve Cagan, from a photographic portrait of the city of Estelí, Nicaragua.

work over its quota to fill in for the men who have gone off to fight on the frontier. In fact, we ordinarily go way beyond the group norm of 600 seedlings per woman per day. We're really exceeding the quota, and that's our voluntary labor. I feel satisfied with this kind of work system. It allows us to work for a living, raise production, and help those who are defending us.

And we never face hunger like the soldiers do. We at least get three meals a day. Sometimes they get food and sometimes they don't get food. And they're the lookouts taking care of us. Well, we're trying to look out for them by increasing the amount of work we're doing. It's like we'll do their work while they're not here. I'm glad we can do something for those who are fighting, because some of them never come back. The other day we had a funeral for three combatants from this farm. Only two others have returned safe from military service. We don't know what will happen to the rest. That's why we're pushing ourselves at work; we're doing it freely for them.

Health Care

We have a medical dispensary here. Our

health worker fights hard to get enough medicine for us. She's concerned about our health, and she really worries about our children. If a child here gets sick at night, she'll go out and try to find a way to get that child to the health center in town or to a hospital. I myself was sick last week, delirious with a wound, and she'd go with me or anyone to wherever we had to go to get help.

In the health center in town there's a well children's program. The staff gives out food to undernourished children and does the same for pregnant women. Women get six months of extra food after their baby is born. You take your children there to be weighed every month. We don't pay anything at all for this service. So my little boy is getting vitamins right now but doesn't need any extra food because he's a little overweight. Undernourished children get rations of cooking oil, milk, flour, canned chicken and sausage. We used to have so many undernourished children, but not now. You can really see the difference.

Transportation, Food, Housing

We have no decent means of transportation. A privately owned truck goes to town on Satur-

day and Sunday, but the truck's owner says he wouldn't get enough business on workdays to pay for gas. So if a mother has a sick child like I did the other day, we have to carry our baby in to town on our back. If it's a bigger child that needs to get to the hospital, we have to go and beg the farm to loan us some kind of transportation. During the week the trucks here carry workers to and from the fields, so there's no guarantee that a truck or car would be around.

The union said the farm would buy two minibuses, but we've never seen them. We keep on raising this issue in union meetings. Sometimes we have to shop in El Crucero in the afternoon. It's 16 miles there and back. It's hard to leave in the afternoon after work, go that far away, and then come back with a heavy bag of groceries. Going we could walk to the highway and get a bus to town. But then we'd have to wait by the highway in order to help me carry things back down the road home.

Soon food will be distributed right here. They'll bring up all the provisions for us to buy here in a farmworkers' store that will sell rice, beans, cooking oil, and many other things like malt drink. Since I have eight in my family, we'll get 16 liters of rice and sugar, 4 liters of oil, and 12 bars of soap every two weeks. Each week we've seen shortages. Sometimes you couldn't get sugar. But there don't seem to be so many shortages right now.

We'll see how well the store works here. We're supposed to have groceries here every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. If the food doesn't come in this week, a group of us women are supposed to go to the farmworkers' union, where we'll get vouchers to buy food in the supermarket in El Crucero. I and my boy who's working get fed in the workers' cafeteria. But what are my other five children going to eat? What if I have to go to Managua? I might not even find white rice. And I can only afford just a quart of rice there. That wouldn't last our children for two weeks.

The farm is trying to grow more varied crops for food. We have some potatoes growing down there now. Right next to my house we raise a little corn and beans for ourselves, maybe a half an acre of corn. My beans didn't make it this year, but other people are successful with beans, so I'll try to plant a few more to

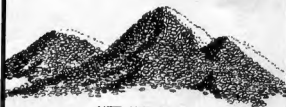
give my kids more to eat.

At first I lived in the workers' sleeping quarters, but I didn't want to live there because men were always carousing and it was hard for a woman alone. I was especially concerned to find a better place for my child. I was lucky because some buildings had been knocked down in a construction project, and there was some wood left. So behind there near the water reservoir, I could set up a little house for myself, away from other people. Now I live in my own house up here. This area was all overgrown, and we came out as a group to clear it off with machetes. We cleared off the land and put up these houses with volunteer labor. We carried the bricks and building blocks and the cement to put the blocks together. At the time we were filled with joy and dreams because we knew we would be having our own houses. We

ROASTED BEANS

NIGARAGUAN COFFEE

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even built a park here with swings and teeter-totters, but storms destroyed that. We don't pay one cent for living here, and we can live in these houses free as long as we work here. This was a project of the Agrarian Reform and the Social Welfare Ministries. We've been living here about two years and are happy except for the fact that we don't have water or electricity up here. We hope we'll get that if God doesn't leave our union and our government's promises up in the air.

Reyna's Education

When I went to school I could never learn to read. It was a bad system, and my mother didn't help me. I became mentally twisted and couldn't learn, even though I wanted to. I envied my brothers and sisters with their papers which they would read and write when they sat down to study. The school expelled me. Even though I couldn't learn, I'd take my notebook and keep going. My mother told me that the teacher would say, "What are you doing here, child?" I'd say, "I want to learn, teacher." When she wrote a little sample of writing on the board for me to copy, I'd faint. I felt twisted inside.

Now if I can't learn, I have a real joy in seeing my children in a school where they can learn. I've talked to doctors about this. They say it would be a real struggle for me, but that I could learn to read, too. However, the struggle might disturb my mind and drive me crazy. During the literacy campaign I went to school for three weeks, but I really couldn't learn anything. The only thing I could do was make blotches in a notebook. Also I had a sick girl that I

had to stay home with. When I went to school then, everything was like a fog to me. I got up my courage and said, "I will learn something, even if it's just a little bit." I was deceiving myself. My brain just wouldn't help. Everything seemed blurry. I couldn't even see the blackboard. Well, my oldest boy started to read in the literacy campaign. So if I can't do it, my children will learn for me.

Reyna and Her Neighbor Talk About Water

Reyna: The water we have to drink is just filthy. You see frogs and toads floating around in the tank. It's that tank up there by the hacienda which we use for our cooking, washing, and drinking water. If you go up there and look inside it, you'd be astonished at how filthy it is. What we do is strain the water, and if we have time we boil it for the small children. But since we come from work so exhausted, we usually just give it to them strained. That water is pure animal! I set a barrel out to collect rain water. That's the only way I can get drinking water, and I keep it in a covered pot in the house.

The water tanks are stopped up now. If they weren't, we could clean them out and have



Steve Cagan

water flow through them. But right now the rain water that streams across the hacienda patio just pours everything into the tank. People, dogs and animals all walk across that flat area, and the rainwater sweeps everything from the patio into the tank. This is the water we drink. It's so dirty, it's a miracle that we're not sick.

Elena: It's really hard to haul all that water up here, because we live about a mile and a half from the main house. I get up at 5 a.m. and don't get out of work until 5 p.m. That's what's wrong. You know, Reyna's a single mother and often has other tasks at work like getting out more seedlings to be taken up into the fields. So what time will she get home to haul water? In my house mostly my little sister hauls water, and she even brings up enough for me to bathe with. But when I get home from work, I'm so tired that I usually leave it in the bucket so that I can bathe in the morning.

Also, because the pump went out, we have a water shortage and risk losing all the seedlings we planted, and you know coffee trees mature only every nine years. We dug up the fields and burned them clear to plant new seedlings, and if those are lost we lose our whole livelihood. If we don't have this way to keep on working, we'll never be able to take care of our children. Two pumps in a row burned out, and the union's going to try to put in another. Meanwhile, everyone from the union got together and brought in water by truck so that we could water the coffee plants with a hose.

Reyna: There was this fellow who came to visit yesterday. What was his name?

Elena: Daniel Ortega.

Reyna: Yes, Daniel Ortega. He briefly visited several of the farms around here to listen to people's problems. We told him we didn't have electricity or water; that we have to go down there to bathe and wash clothes and that we can't even iron up here. He said he'd get two small trucks to haul water and that he'd get the pump fixed. And next year, if the country increased its coffee production and had a greater import-export ratio, then we'd get electricity. They want to find a way to pump water to where we're living as well as have it at the hacienda. He promised us this. We said, "Watch out, don't leave us with just an illusion that

we're going to get electricity and water." He assured us that yes, he would do it. We hope his words will indeed come true.

Elena: We know the union really wants to help us. They don't want to lie to us. They want to know our problems so they can fight for the solution.



Tina Modotti, Meeting of the Hands-Off Nicaragua committee, Mexico, 1926

Julia Lesage is co-editor of JUMP CUT, a review of contemporary media, and has travelled to Nicaragua to shoot videos and recently completed two works: "Las Nicas," on Nicaraguan women, and "Homelife," on Nicaraguan families.

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